

from Halls of Fame

by John D'Agata

ROUND TRIP

I

Isaac, who is twelve, has come involuntarily.

"We insist he grow up cultured," his mother says, leaning over our headrests from the seat behind. "My father brought me to Hoover Dam on a bus. There is just no other way to see it."

Hours ago, before the bus, I found the tour among the dozens of brochures in my hotel lobby. It had been typed and Xeroxed, folded three times into the form of a leaflet, and crammed into the back of a countertop rack on the bellhop's "What To Do" desk in Vegas.

Nearby my tour in the brochure rack were announcements for Colorado River raft rides that would paddle visitors upstream into the great gleaming basin of the dam.

There were ads, too, for helicopter rides—offering to fly "FOUR friends and YOU" over "CROWDS, TRAFFIC, this RIVER & MAN's MOST BEAUTIFUL structure—all YOURS to be PHOTOGRAPHED at 10,000 FEET!"

Hot-air balloon tours.

Rides on mountain bikes.

Jaunts on donkeys through the desert, along the river, and up the dam's canyon wall.

There was even something called the Hoover Dam Shopper's Coach, whose brochure guaranteed the best mall bargains in Nevada, yet failed to mention anywhere on its itinerary Hoover Dam.

Brochure in hand, I stood in line at the tour's ticket booth behind a man haggling with a woman behind the glass. He wanted a one-way ticket to Hoover Dam.

"Impossible," the woman said. "We sell The Eleven-Dollar Tour. One tour, one price."

The one-way man went on about important business he had at the dam, things he had to see to, how the tour's schedule just wasn't time enough.

"Sir," she said, through security glass, "I'm telling you, you'll have to come back. They're not gonna let you stay out there."

He bought a ticket, moved on.

We boarded.

Like the ad said, The Eleven-Dollar Tour comes with a seat on the bus, a free hot-dog coupon, and a six-hour narrative, there and back.

Our bus is silver, round, a short, chubby thing. It is shaped like a bread box. Like a bullet. "Like they used to make them," says Isaac's mom.

I turn to Isaac, my seatmate, say, "Hi, my name is John," and he says he doesn't care, and proceeds to pluck the long blond lashes from his eyelids, one by one, standing them on his wrist, stuck there by their follicles.

It is at this point that Isaac's mom leans over our headrests

and tells me that Isaac is a good boy, "talkative, really," that he just happens to be grumpy today because "Mother and Father" have insisted that he accompany them on this "educational tour." Isaac's mother tells me that to keep Isaac entertained in Las Vegas they are staying in a new hotel—the largest in the world, in fact—with 5,000 guest rooms, 4 casinos, 17 restaurants, a mega-musical amphitheater, a boxing ring, a monorail, and a 33-acre amusement park, all inside an emerald building. She presents the brochure.

I say, "Wow."

Then Isaac's dad, looking up from another brochure he holds in his lap, says, "You know, kiddo, this Hoover Dam looks pretty special!" And then come statistics from the paragraph he's reading.

The feet high.

The feet thick.

The cubic yards of concrete.

Of water.

The 3 million kilowatts.

And the plaque.

"Let me see that." Isaac's mom takes the brochure and reads the plaque's inscription to herself. She shakes her head.

"Do you believe that? Isaac, honey, listen."

Isaac's eyes roll far away. His mother's voice climbs up a stage.

She is just loud enough to be overheard. Just hushed enough to silence all of us.

It is her voice, and the quiet, and the words on the plaque that I think might have made the whole trip worth it even

then, even before we left the tour company's parking lot and learned there'd be no air-conditioning on the six-hour ride; even before we stood in line for two hours at the dam; before the snack bar ran out of hot dogs and the tour guide of his jokes; before the plaque was laid in 1955 by Ike; before the dam was dedicated in 1935 by FDR; before the ninety-six men died "to make the desert bloom"; or before the Colorado first flooded, before it leaked down from mountains, carved the Grand Canyon, and emptied into the ocean. Even before this plaque was cast by a father and his son in their Utah blacksmith shop, there was the anticipation of the plaque, its gold letters riding on the backs of all creators. And Isaac's mother's voice, even then, I believe, was ringing circles somewhere in the air: "... the American Society of Civil Engineers voted this one of the Seven Modern Wonders of the World!"

These are the seven wonders of the world: a beacon, a statue, gardens, pyramids, a temple, another statue, and a tomb. I have set eyes on them all—this Lofty fire of Pharos, and the statue of Zeus by Alpheus, and the Hanging Gardens, and the Colossus of the Sun, and the Huge Labor of the High Pyramids, and the Vast tomb of Mausolus, and the House of Artemis mounted to the Clouds—and I tell you, as a scholar and as a wanderer and as a man devoted to the gods, they are and always will be the Seven Greatest Liberties man will ever take with Nature.

(Antipater of Sidon, from his lost guidebook, c. 120 B.C.)

Our driver maneuvers lithely through the streets filled with rental cars. I tilt my head into the aisle. There is his green-sleeved arm, his pale, pudgy hand that is dancing on the gear stick rising out of the floor. His head, bobbing above the rows of seats in front of me, seems to bounce in rhythm with his horn. He honks to *let* pedestrians cross.

He rearranges his hair.

Leans a little forward.

Fluffs a cushion at his back.

We are idling at a crosswalk. We are there seven minutes, when suddenly, out of the air, our driver's voice comes coiling.

On the right side of us is the Flamingo Hotel where Elvis Presley owned a floor of that hotel on our right side.

On the left side of us is the Mirage Hotel where Michael Jackson owns a floor of that hotel on our left side.

His words emit circles, whip bubbles around our heads. His sentences wrap around the bus and greet themselves in midair. All the way to the dam the bus rumbles inside this cloud, the date slips steadily away, the tour transforms into a silent scratchy film that is slowly flitting backward through frames of older dreams.

We sit among neo-Gothic images heaping up from the pages of a souvenir borrowed from Isaac's grandfather, a 1935 photographic essay entitled "The Last Wonder of the World: The Glory of Hoover Dam." On its brittle pages machines still throb, light still beams from the book's center spread.

A full, glossy, long-shot view of the generator room reveals

round, sleek, plastic bodies lined up like an army, surrounded by looming concrete walls adorned with pipes of gleaming chrome. Everything stands at attention. Nothing but light is stirring. The whole scene is poised forever to strike against an enemy that never breached the river's shore.

Gambling wasn't legalized in our state until 1935 is when they legalized gambling in Nevada.

The patterns in these pictures are like wax dripping from candles, islands coagulating from spurts of lava, liquid steel pouring out of kettles into rifle molds, Buick frames, the skyscrapers of Chicago. The round machines spin their energy like spools, all of it rolling off their bodies, through the pages, over the slick, curved surface of the next machine, which is identical to the last: which is blinking the same, rounded the same, parodying his sentences revolving around our heads, and shielding our tour from starts and stops, from *In the beginning*, from *Ever after*, from *Now* and from *Then*, and from any time—from all time—in which this vacuous progression cannot fit, because its round body is nowhere near the right shape for the boxy borders of dates.

Just to let you know, folks, our tour company's been on the road since 1945 is how long we've been traveling this road.

I mention to Isaac that the machines resemble something I once saw in *Doctor Who*, and he says, "No they don't"—which is the first thing he has said to me in an hour.

"It's more like *Star Trek's* Plasma Generator," he says. But when I tell him I don't quite follow him, we decide that something from *Batman* suits our conflicting descriptions best.

What we do not know at this moment, however, is that in

1935, when the dam was opened, Batman was about to make his debut in comic strips. So was Superman, and other superheroes—summoned from Krypton or Gotham City to defend our country against impending evils—their bodies toned flawlessly as turbines. They came with tales of an ideal Tomorrow. They came jostled between two wars, buffering our borders against enemies on every side, encircling the country with an impenetrable force field, and introducing at home a new architecture of resistance: round, sleek, something the old clunky world slipped off.

A lot of these trees and most of this grass is brought in from out of state.

A lot of these trees and most of this grass is brought in from Arizona.

These are the same curves I once found in my grandmother's basement. Toasters so streamlined they're liable to skid off the kitchen counter. A hair dryer filched from Frankenstein's brain-wave lab. A Philharmonic radio taller than my ten-year-old body, and reeking of Swing—leaking tinny voices, platinum songs, and the catch-me-if-you-can whorls from Benny Goodman's silvery tube.

My grandmother's is the world that dropped the bomb—itsself a slick object—so elegantly smooth it managed to slip past American consciousness, past enemy lines.

Afterward, in her world, "Atomic" was a prefix attached to the coming world and all the baubles to be found there. But in that present, at the opening of Hoover Dam, the designers of the future could only have guessed what atoms looked like.

And still their imaginations leaped instantly to *round*, to *fast*, to *heralds of the future*.

3

During the sixth century, St. Gregory of Tours compiled a list of the seven wonders of the medieval world which demonstrates an inaccurate knowledge of history. He retained four wonders from the original list, but made three additions of his own: Noah's Ark, Solomon's Temple, and the Original Tree of Life—which, he claimed, had been discovered in the underground archives of a church in his native France. But St. Gregory, of course, was wrong. The remains of the Tree of Life were used to construct the Crucifix on which our Saviour died—now housed, of course, in the Holy Cross Church in Rome.

(from my grandmother's library, G. B. Smith's *Remembering the Saints*)

4

"There's this computer game I like so I guess that counts right? It's not the real world but it lets you do really awesome stuff that's pretty cool so you can call that a wonder I bet. But I gotta go to my friend's house to play it though 'cause my parents won't get it for me 'cause they think it's too violent. Hey you can't write this down or I'm not talking man. It's called

Civilization. You start with two guys—a guy and a girl—and they're like at the start of the world or something. But after all the animals are made and stuff. And then—um—you have to make babies because the whole point is to you know start the civilization. So the computer keeps asking you what you want to do. Like if you want to have babies at a certain time or if you wanna be a hunter and gatherer or start farming and all that. So at the same time the computer has its own family that it's starting and you have to be in competition with them. So you start your family and all that and you become a village and . . . that's all the boring stuff. But you have to do it to start up the game. So before you know it you're like the leader and everything and people start gods and that kind of stuff and there's laws that you get to make up like if you want people to steal or how many wives you can have. And all of a sudden the computer calls war on you and you have to fight them 'cause if you don't then the game ends 'cause the computer can kill all your people. So there's whole long parts when you gotta learn how to do battle and you decide if you wanna use your metal to make weapons or not and how many people you'll make fight 'cause after you play a long time you learn that if you keep some people in the village during the war you can make them keep making weapons and stuff and help the fighters who are hurt. And usually if you make it through the war with some people left then the computer won't kill you off 'cause it'll let you try to start the village again. So all that happens and—um—every now and then the computer lets you know that someone in the village makes an invention. Like if they use the well to try to make a clock or they build a building with

stones that has a roof so you can put more floors on top of it and—you know—then cities start. Then people start sailing down the river and they find other places to live and there are like whole new civilizations that the computer controls that you get to find. Now it all depends on how you act with the new people that tells whether or not you start a war or something or if you join their village and team up your forces. When that happens the computer gives you a lot more technology. So all that goes on and like thousands of years go by and pretty soon it starts looking like the modern world and you're controlling a whole country. Then your goal is to get control of the whole world which only one of my friends has done but then there's always this little place you don't know about that starts a revolution and then the whole world starts fighting and everyone ends up dead. I've never gotten that far though. I've controlled a couple countries before and I usually make them all start a colony in space and what's great is that if you tell them to fly to a planet in the solar system then the computer isn't programmed that far and it lets you do whatever you want for a little while until it just ends the game 'cause it doesn't know how to continue 'cause it can't compete with you if you just keep inventing new stuff it hasn't heard of. So sometimes I get like three countries to go up there and they start this whole new civilization and there are new animals and just the right amount of people and all the buildings are beautiful and built with this river that turns hard when you pick up the water and you can shape it how you want. So there's all this glass around and it's awesome but it only lasts like a year be-

cause the computer gets freaked out and ends up stopping the game. The game always ends up destroying the world."

5

When the Canal was being completed, the renowned sculptor Daniel Chester French and the best-known landscape architect of the day, Frederick Law Olmsted, were hired to decorate it. After a careful survey, the two artists refused the commission. So impressed were they by the beauty which the engineers had created that they declared, "For we artists to add to it now would be an impertinence."

1. The Panama Canal, 1914

MY LIST

"Hello, Joe Miller here."

"Hi, sir. I'm wondering if maybe you could help me out. I'm trying to find the American Society of Civil Engineers' list of the Seven Modern Wonders of the World. Are you the right person to talk to?"

"Yeah, yeah that's me. I think the list you're talking about is pretty old, though. We just announced a new list you might be interested in."

"A new list?"

"The 1999 Modern Wonders of the World."

"Oh. Well, actually I guess I'm interested in the old Modern list."

"Well that's forty years old! This new one we have is a lot more impressive. I think this is what you're looking for."

"Well, could you maybe tell me about the first list anyway? I can't find it mentioned anywhere in my library. I kind of need it."

"Well, that'll take some time. . . . Let me get back to you . . ."

A common witticism on that bleak Depression day when this spectacular skyscraper opened its doors was, "The only way the landlords will ever fill that thing is if they tow it out to sea." But such pessimistic sentiments were wrong, as pessimists always have been in America. The population of the building now is that of a small city!

2. The Empire State Building,
1931

MY GRANDFATHER'S LIST

"Just put down the Statue of Liberty.
That's all I want you to put down."

How do you dig a hole deeper than anyone has ever dug, fill it with more concrete and steel than has been used in any other public works campaign, and do it all in the middle of California's

busiest harbor, swiftest current, most stormy shore? No, no! it would be sheer folly to try—but they did it anyway!

3. The San Francisco–Oakland Bay
Bridge, 1936

MY MOTHER'S LIST

1. The Twin Towers
2. The Apollo Space Program
3. PCs
4. Cannabis
5. Picasso
6. August 9, 1974 (Richard Nixon's resignation)
7. Cape Cod

Then the fun begins. The aqueduct's route crosses two hundred forty-two miles of terrain that looks as if it had been dropped intact from the moon: a landscape of mountainous sands, dry washes, empty basins—one of the hottest, deadliest wastelands in the civilized world. . . . And this conduit, man's longest, spans it all!

4. The Colorado River Aqueduct, 1938

ISAAC'S MOTHER'S LIST

"Oh, I know these. One must be the Brooklyn Bridge. I practically grew up on that thing! The

Eiffel Tower has to be on there. Probably the Sears Tower, too. The Washington Monument. Niagara Falls. What about the Pentagon? And the Hoover Dam, of course."

Flying over the city, below the left wing of the plane, you will see Chicago's Southwest Works, one of the largest and most advanced sewage treatment facilities in the world. It is a veritable modern city, as spanking-looking as if sealed in a fresh-washed bottle, and as motionless and silent as a hospital at night.

5. The Chicago Sewage Disposal System, 1939

GUY-IN-A-BAR'S LIST

1. A rapid development in our fine and visual arts
2. With all of our technological advancements, a continued sadness among the people
3. Our ignorance of environmental problems
4. Magic
5. The Internet
6. Alaska
7. Hoover Dam

A certain stopper was the fact that the Coulee could only rise to 550 feet. At that height it backed up the Columbia River into a 150-mile-long lake. Any higher and it would have flooded Canada.

6. The Grand Coulee Dam, 1941

JOE MILLER'S LIST

"Yeah, this is a message for John D'Agata. I have that information you requested. This is the 1999 list of Modern Wonders of the World:

- one is The Golden Gate Bridge;
- two, The World Trade Center;
- three, The U.S. Interstate Highway System;
- four, The Kennedy Space Center;
- five, The Panama Canal;
- six, The Trans-Alaskan Pipeline;
- and seven is Hoover Dam."

It lofts up with the majesty of Beauty itself, and you marvel at what manner of men could have conceived the possibility of building such a wonder.

7. The Hoover Dam, 1935 (from *America the Beautiful: An Introduction to Our Seven Wonders*)

6

Perhaps the Book of Genesis is the first and most famous list of wonders. Today, however, such rosters of remarkable things are common in America.

Whenever I visit a city for the first time, I always notice the gold stars on storefronts—"Voted Best Barbershop," "... Mexican Food," "... Auto Repair." My brother, who

prides himself on his ability to spot "quality trends," as he calls them, has sworn for years by *Boston Magazine's* annual "Best Of" issue.

He says that living by the list is like living in a perfect world. And the list has grown so comprehensive each year that, these days, my brother seldom has to live without perfection. He has found, for example, a "professional scalper" with the best last-minute Bruins ticket deals, a launderer known for having the best-pressed cuffs, and a sportsman's lodge with the best range for skeet shooting—a sport my brother has taken up simply out of awe of it being listed.

Another purveyor of perfection has gone so far as to publish a book-length list, entitled *The Best of Everything*, which includes the Best Sexy Animal (the female giraffe), the Best Labor-Saving Device (the guillotine), the Best Vending Machine (a mashed-potato dispenser in Nottingham, England), and the Best Souvenir (a shrunken head from Quito, Ecuador).

Not to be outdone, proponents of the worst things in the world have published *The Worst of Everything*. On this list can be found the Worst Nobel Peace Prize Recipient (Henry Kissinger), the Worst Item Ever Auctioned (Napoleon's dried penis), the Worst Poem Ever Written ("The Child" by Friedrich Hebbel), and the Worst Celebrity Endorsement for a Car (Hitler, for the Volkswagen Bug: "This streamlined four-seater is a mechanical marvel. It can be bought on an installment plan for six Reichsmarks a week—including insurance!")

Now Isaac's mother leans over our seats and shows us both another brochure.

"Just think how happy they all must have been," she says, unfolding an artist's rendition of the future across our laps. "I sure wish I lived back then. You know?"

1939. Queens, New York.

She, Isaac, and I have just paid our fifty cents, and before us—miles wide—are promenades, sculptures, buildings, and glittery things, all laid out in perfect grids. "So bright and lovely," she says, "it makes me want to close my eyes." Even the people around us shine, sweaty inside their wool suits and skirts. There are thousands of them, Isaac decides—just like the people who walk around EPCOT.

"You know," he says. "The kind who you can't really tell are real or not."

We buy frankfurters, a guidebook, little silver spoons at every exhibition. We are here because—even as far west as Nevada, even as far into the future as 1999—we have heard that this is the greatest fair ever orchestrated on earth.

We start with Isaac's mom's list: the Gardens on Parade, the Town of Tomorrow, the House of Jewels, the Plaza of Light, Democracy.

Then we visit Isaac's list: the Futurama, the Academy of Sports, the Court of Power, the Lagoon of Nations, the Dome of the Heinz Corp.

And by the time we visit my list we have stumbled smack into the middle of the fair, inches from its epicenter, squinting back up at those dazzling fair trademarks known in our guidebook as *Trylon* and *Perisphere*. The obelisk and the globe stand like silence behind the roaring and spurting of ten giant fountains.

The two of them are like fountains behind the silence of our gaze.

One of them is stretched so high it scrapes the color from the sky. The other is arched playfully on its own curved back.

The obelisk, we read, is 610 feet tall ("That's 50 feet taller than the Washington Monument!" our guidebook claims). The sphere is 180 feet in diameter ("The largest globe in the state of New York!").

Both objects are words that never before existed. And despite all the euphoria surrounding them in '39, all the family photos posed in front of them, the silverware and shaving kits and Bissell Carpet Sweepers that bore their images, *Trylon* and *Perisphere* never made it into our lexicon.

At the foot of them, I can't see why.

One is like a list, the other is like a wonder. But I don't say this aloud.

"An arrow and a bull's-eye!" one of us blurts out. And so they are. Perfectly.

Or one is like an ancient scroll unrolled; the other is an orb of indecipherable glyphs. One is how we describe a fantasy; the other is what we've secretly dreamt.

Shoulder to shoulder, we three look them up, then down. Our mouths hang wide—with *awe*—filled with them.

I remember the first list of wonders that I ever knew. One year, an old man on our street told my mother that he had once been a college professor, a master of Latin and Greek. Within days I was studying classics with him. I had just turned eight.

My tutor, Mr. Newcomb, lived alone among statuary and

plaster casts of temple friezes. Tapestries padded his walls. I met with him each day in the barest room of his house: a desk, two chairs, a lamp, a rug, and seven hanging woodcuts of the seven ancient wonders.

Some days, instead of reading, Mr. Newcomb beguiled me with trivia about the hanging wonders on his walls. And some days, strewn over the years, he divulged their secrets. Why, for instance, the curse of the Pyramids in fact is real; where, in Turkey, the Colossus' body parts are actually hidden; what, according to Vatican documents, which Mr. Newcomb alone had read in Rome, Napoleon "felt" as he pissed on the charred remains of Diana's great temple.

Later, Mr. Newcomb's woodcuts of the seven ancient wonders became mine once he had died. At that point, however, I had only managed to grasp the first conjugation in Latin, so for years after, until I could return to Latin in school, the ancient wonders lived beside me in a parallel present tense.

I have them still. They hang around—dark, worn—reminding me of the last wonderful secret my tutor left: that he had never studied Latin, never read the classics. That he had never traveled to Rome, nor much farther beyond our town.

He had never actually liked school.

Yet what he had was curiosity. Crustiness. An air of scholastic formality. He had a dustiness that was reliable. A home adorned tastefully, lessons always prepared for me, cookies, milk, stories that kept me rapt. He had a knack, which was his lure, for both the mundane and fantastic.

The black-breasted roadrunner, my favorite bird, is that black-breasted roadrunner there.

The bird hurries past our bus, darting up the mountain pass as we slowly descend its peak. I am awakened by our driver's voice and my ears popping as we slide into the valley. Everyone else, everyone except for Isaac and the one-way man, is asleep. They chat across the center aisle.

"I'm gonna live there," says the one-way man, when Isaac asks what he'll do when we arrive at the dam.

"You can live there?" Isaac asks.

"Well, I'm gonna," says the man.

Isaac's mom, I know, would want me to intervene here, tell Isaac the man's just joking with him. Tell Isaac the one-way man is crazy.

But when Isaac starts talking about his computer game, and the one-way man explains how the concave wall of the Hoover Dam would be awesome for skateboarding, it is they who stop, mutually—nowhere conclusive and without any care.

They sit back in their seats, stare forward awhile, and fall asleep.

7

continents, days per week, Deadly Sins, Epochs of Man according to Shakespeare, hills of Rome, liberal arts, perfect shapes, planets in the Ptolemaic system, Pleiades in Greek myth, Sacraments, seas, Sleepers of Ephesus, wives of Bluebeard, wonders of Yemen, Years War

Door No. Two

The Wonders of the Bat World; The Wonders of the Beetle World; The Wonders of Blue Grass: As Seen Through Blue Glass with Fifteen Silhouette Illustrations Included; The Wonders of Bodily Strength and Skill in All Ages and Countries; The Wonders of Britain, and Where to Find Them.

The Wonders of California; Caribou; Cells; The Wonders of the Certainty of the World; The Circus: Man, Monkey, and Dog Wonders; The Wonders of the Colorado Desert: Its Rivers and Mountains, Its Canyons and Springs; The Wonders of the Creator and the Creature.

The Wonders of Dairy Cattle; Divine Love; Draft Horses; Dreams; Dunes; Dust; The Wonders of Dying.